

Volunteering in Global Health

A Question-Based Planning Guide

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Introduction

This document was created by Elizabeth Barreras-Rivest on behalf of the OSR Committee on Community and Diversity and is intended for use by pre-clinical and clinical medical students. All content reflects the views of the OSR Committee on Community and Diversity and does not reflect the official policy of the AAMC unless clearly specified.

This document is intended for use by medical students in their pre-clinical or clinical years who are considering volunteering or doing a medical rotation abroad. Our intention is to aid in the process of preparation to ensure that students are maximizing their time abroad and to ensure that the host country and project are actively involved in the planning process. With focused preparation and planning, medical students have the opportunity to maximally contribute to projects abroad and to leave the host feeling satisfied and encouraged to invite more students to participate in the opportunity. This document lists some of the main questions that students should first consider when they are beginning to think about opportunities abroad. It includes some answers, which can be accessed online; however, it largely encourages collaboration and consultation with the student's school and administration, host institution abroad, and mentoring physician to prepare for the opportunity. The goal is that this document will help students make better decisions in terms of the projects they participate in, will help students avoid "voluntourism", and will simplify ambiguities that students may feel throughout the planning process.

To provide feedback on this document, please contact OSR Director, Mary Halicki, mhalicki@aamc.org.

Questions to Ask Yourself

Why/Value/Impact

- What do I want to accomplish when I volunteer abroad? Is it a realistic goal?
- What value do I add to the community I will be working with and what impact can I have at this point in my medical training?
 - [Here](#) are volunteer organizations that are medically oriented – it's a good idea to ask them what they would let you do abroad.
- What are my limitations in terms of what procedures or patient situations I can be involved in?
- Can I get credit at school for volunteering or working abroad?
- How does this experience contribute to my future goals as a doctor?

Cost

- How much is a volunteer experience going to cost?
 - A good sample breakdown of things you should expect to pay for can be found [here](#).
- How much is my volunteer experience going to cost my host?
- Is there any funding available from my school to go abroad?

When/Timing

- How much time can I spend abroad?
- Is there a better time in my life as a student or future career as a doctor when I would have more impact?

How

- Should I go with an established organization or do I have the resource to go alone?
 - Some pros and cons of going alone vs. going with an organization can be found [here](#).
- Can I partner with a medical school in the country I am visiting?
- Can I partner with a local doctor or clinic in the country I am visiting?
- Do I speak the language in the country I am visiting? If not, is a translator available?
- Am I allowed to have patient contact without licensing from the host country?
- Do I need a visa from the host country to participate in the volunteer opportunity?
 - [Here](#) is the State Department website that allows for rapid search of visa requirements.
- What are my safety concerns? Do I need travel insurance or emergency evacuation coverage?
- Are there other students I know who I can go abroad with?

Questions to Ask Your Dean or Other Administration

Why/Value/Impact

- Can I go abroad for credit or for a research opportunity?
- Can I go abroad as part of an existing program or research project through school?

Cost

- What financial support does the school provide when abroad?
- What funding opportunities do you offer?
- Is there any travel insurance I need in addition to school insurance?
- When is the best time to go abroad?

How

- What partnerships does the school have with institutions or hospitals abroad?
- Who can I call at my medical school in an emergency situation?

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What vaccinations do I need?
 - Country specific information can be found [here](#).
 - CDC recommendations [here](#).
 - WHO recommendations [here](#).
- What prescription medications do I need to take with me (i.e. malaria prophylaxis, antibiotics)?
- What over the counter medications should I take with me?
- What are the main health concerns I should worry about when I go abroad?
- Am I in the right mental and physical condition to go abroad?
- How can I get in touch with my doctor when I go abroad?
- Who should I call in an emergency situation (doctor, emergency insurance, etc.)?
 - Resources for finding a doctor or hospital abroad can be found [here](#).
- Do I need to carry my yellow fever vaccination card or shot record with me to the country I am visiting?

Questions to Ask the Clinic or Doctor You Are Working With Abroad

- How can I use my skill set most effectively with you?
- What services or resources do you need?
- Have you hosted any foreign volunteers in the past and if so, what was the experience like?
- What can I expect on a day-to-day basis?
- Do you have any information I can review before I arrive regarding your community or patient population?

Important Travel Tips

- Be aware of travel warnings and alerts. Check [here](#).
- Make an appointment with your travel doctor at least 4-6 weeks before traveling.
- Register your trip with the State Department through the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) [here](#).
- If you are going with a registered charity, buy travel insurance [here](#).
- Check CDC traveler health issues [here](#).
- If the organization you are traveling with is registered with Fly for Good, get discounted airfare [here](#).
- Leave a copy or photo of your passport, insurance card and other important travel documents in your suitcase and another copy with family or friends at home.
- Bring the generic names of your medications in case you need to get more abroad.
- Find a doctor or hospital abroad [here](#).
- Visit website for foreign embassies [here](#). Learn foreign laws (can you drive?)
- LGBT travel information [here](#).
- Information for women travelers [here](#).

Global Health Learning Opportunities (GHLO)

The AAMC facilitates global mobility for final year students pursuing clinical, research or public health electives outside their home country through the GHLO Collaborative. For institutions, GHLO embraces innovation and builds global understanding through enhancing dialogue, exchanging ideas and best practices, and conducting joint research.

Students attending participating GHLO institutions are able to utilize the GHLO application service, a Web-based platform that streamlines the elective search and application process for students. Additionally, it enables home institutions to endorse student applications and track progress, and host institutions to publish and manage elective offerings, student selection and evaluation. To check and see if your medical school currently participates in the GHLO Collaborative, check [here](#).

If you do not find your medical school here, please inform your Dean of Student Affairs and Dean of Medical Education about GHLO and encourage them to learn more about GHLO by visiting <https://www.aamc.org/services/ghlo/> or sending an email to ghloadmin@aamc.org. Student inquiries should be directed to ghlostudent@aamc.org.

Reference and Reading List

Crump, J., & Sugarman, J. (2010). Ethics and Best Practice Guidelines for Training Experiences in Global Health. *American Journal of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 1178-1182.

Illich, I. To Hell with Good Intentions. Transcribed version can be found [here](#).

Ouma, B. D., & Dimaras, H. (2013). Views from the global south: exploring how student volunteers from the global north can achieve sustainable impact in global health. *Globalization and Health*, 9, 32. doi:10.1186/1744-8603-9-32

Werner, D., & Maxwell, J. (2010). *Where there is no doctor: A village health care handbook* (New rev. ed.). Berkeley, Calif.: Hesperian.

Davidson, R. (2014). *Oxford handbook of tropical medicine* (Fourth ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.